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# Engaged or Activist Scholarship? Feminist reflections on philosophy, accountability and transformational potential

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## Abstract

Van De Ven's Engaged Scholarship is becoming institutionalised in the academic profession. His argument that research is radically under-used and more likely to be employed if practitioners engage in shaping research questions and processes is convincing. Nevertheless, Engaged Scholarship has been little critiqued. This article draws on feminist critical realist ontology to compare its philosophy, accountability and transformational potential with a method more familiar to feminism: Activist research. Engaged Scholarship is found to be underlaboured by a positivist ontology and strong social constructionist epistemology, skewed to the interests of power holders and unlikely to transform underlying social relations. Drawing on Activist Scholarship's partisan accountability to the marginalised and commitment to collective action, but retaining the possibility of change by engaging power holders, we propose Engaged–Activist Scholarship, a method underlaboured by feminist critical realism, pluralist in its methodology, ambidextrous in its audience and accountable to transforming oppressive contexts.

## Keywords

critical realism, Engaged Scholarship, entrepreneurship, gender

## Introduction

As feminist researchers intent on explaining and changing oppressive entrepreneurship contexts, we welcome Van De Ven's (2007, 2011, 2016a) call for an impactful research method. We also concur with the motivating arguments of Engaged Scholarship that developing knowledge with practitioners brings us closer to the complex situations and sensemaking we research and practitioners are more likely to change in light of knowledge if they buy into the research questions and are involved in research. In short, we are more convinced by the knowledge engagement than the knowledge transfer paradigm (see Bowen and Graham, 2013). Moreover, we are grateful that Van

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De Ven offers a specific research process;<sup>1</sup> Engaged Scholarship supports a vital conversation about the philosophy, purpose and process of impactful research. However, we also welcome this Special Issue's critical engagement with Engaged Scholarship. Employing a feminist critical realist position, we scrutinise the philosophy, accountability and transformational potential of Van De Ven's method and compare it with an alternative: Activist Scholarship. Drawing on both, we propose to the entrepreneurship research community an approach that is ambidextrous in addressing power holders and the marginalised and underlaboured by feminist critical realism: Engaged–Activist Scholarship.

We begin by systematically comparing Engaged and Activist Scholarship. Focusing on each method, in turn, we explicate the following: (1) philosophy (underlabouring ontological and epistemological assumptions), (2) accountability (responsibility to whom and for what), and (3) transformational potential (process and likelihood of changing social relations). Again making argument over these three themes, we explicate how Engaged–Activist Scholarship is underlaboured by feminist critical realist philosophy, accountable to the marginalised (among others) and transformative via plural methodologies, ambidextrous relations and collective action.

We are at pains to establish Engaged–Activist research as a mainstream method, entrepreneurship research questions not obviously concerned with the marginalised – such as how to design an effective incubator space or develop digital enterprise – might seem removed from Engaged–Activism. That is, until we consider the gender and other social structural issues at hand (e.g. Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Dy et al., 2016; Marlow and McAdam, 2012). The world we *all* research is deeply social structured. Engaging with and logically analysing the conditions of action confronted by the marginalised should be a watchword for rigour in *all* entrepreneurship research. This is particularly so for engaged researchers; being accountable to the marginal and working to change oppressive contexts is our collective ethical responsibility.

Of course, the entrepreneurship research community has a heritage of devising or delivering practical actions, usually state or 'big business'-sponsored support for small firms and enterprise education. Our concern is that key questions are overlooked when engagement is predominantly with pro-masculine neo-liberal institutions of state and market. For example, Why are so many small traders internationally poor? Why are housing, welfare and care services missing from enterprise ecosystems? How does the discourse of enterprise as an open route of opportunity disguise inequalities in global pro-masculine capitalism?

We hope Engaged–Activism will resonate beyond entrepreneurship research to the management and social research communities. Critical research that aims to create a more just, liveable world (King and Learmonth, 2015) tends to be distant and hesitant in its relationship to practice; operating under specialist language and nuanced theories, it can seem self-referential (Liebert et al., 2011). For example, while feminist scholarship has its roots in political action (Ackerly and True, 2010), engagement and activism are rarely discussed in feminist management research. It is time for critical research to take a 'performative turn' (Spicer et al., 2009) imagining and working for just alternatives.

Before scrutinising Engaged and Activist Scholarships and setting out our proposal for Engaged–Activist Scholarship, we begin by outlining our position as feminist critical realists. Feminism is the struggle to empower people marginalised by cultural and social structures founded on sex. While there are much global feminisms, they struggle against common 'deep' mechanisms. Critical realism is a philosophical theory that enables us to think harder about how underlying social relations create events and experience and how we can generate deep causal explanation. Philosophy may be alien to practitioners, but it is a vital question for engaged researchers because it provides underlabouring theory about what causes the world to be the way it is and to change (Brannan et al., 2017; Kitching and Rouse, 2017). We outline why, as feminist entrepreneurship

researchers, we consider critical realism a more useful ontology than social constructionism – on which gender and entrepreneurship research commonly draws (following Ahl, 2006) – and positivism – on which much entrepreneurship research (implicitly) relies. We also explain why feminist critical realism demands an accountable and transformative research method and, so, why we analyse Engaged and Activist Scholarship in terms of philosophy, accountability and transformative potential and propose Engaged–Activist Scholarship employing these analytical themes.

## **The philosophy, accountability and transformational potential of feminist critical realism**

### *Bhaskar's philosophy and research accountability*

The foundational critical realist idea is depth ontology. Roy Bhaskar (1978) argued that reality is deeply stratified over three levels: the real or deep, where social and cultural structures are enduring mechanisms that tend to be triggered in particular contexts; events, things that happen and that may trigger social structuring relations (or not); and experience, the human's subjective (and fallible) noticing and sensemaking of an event. Gender, through this lens, is a deep structure that tends to materially disadvantage people with a female body through cultural ideas that emphasise and exaggerate embodied sex differences and social rules that constrains what women (and men) can legitimately think, say, do and own. Gender has been characterised as a rhizome, a multi-centred root system with various and changing effects and, it seems, infinite power to regenerate (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Critical realism enables us to develop knowledge about gender as an underlying structure and to explain when and how it emerges in events and experience. It supports us to be part of a movement that creates many, and collective, ruptures (Liebert et al., 2011).

Entrepreneurship, under critical realism, involves socially and culturally structured projects in which human agents with the potential for creative thought and action invest resources in trading goods and services (Kitching and Rouse, 2017). Entrepreneurship is gendered when resource availability, entrepreneur identity and action or markets are shaped by gender relations.

For critical realists, society is an open system whose social structures operate within a multi-level, laminated system. As social structures interact in a given event, they may reinforce, mediate or subvert one another (Clegg, 2016; Dy et al., 2014). When mediated or subverted, structures cannot be empirically observed. This complexity of social relations means that structures are tendencies, rather than laws, and consequently they create demi-routine events. Both structures and the organisation of structures in the whole, complex system may change as structures interact in particular events. In this sense, structures and social organisation are both emergent. Whether transformational or not, events may not be perceived by any given agent. Both the social constructionist's focus on respondent sensemaking and the positivist's search for constant conjunctions ignore this depth of reality and the complex conditions of emergence.

Respondent experience provides highly fallible insight into events and underlying social mechanisms because events and structures may go unperceived or be interpreted imperfectly. For example, a woman entrepreneur may be prevented from purchasing land or be expected to take principle responsibility for domestic work. From her socially influenced position, she may not perceive this event; she may never have enough money to buy land or may accept an unfair division of labour as a normal part of heterosexual love (Jónasdóttir and Ferguson, 2014). Thus, critical realists reject the social constructionist's tendency to rely on practitioner sensemaking to inform their understanding of reality (Bhaskar and Danemark, 2006). Explanation must go beyond re-telling of experience.

Events are also a fallible lens through which to judge the real or deep. Take, for example, what we might infer from events the state of gender relations at the global political level. In 2016, both

Germany and the United Kingdom were led by women and, for the first time, a woman was a credible candidate for the US Presidency. Patriarchy (a social system dominated by men and masculinity) seemed, empirically, to be on the wane. Yet, the elected US President spoke and acted patriarchally. The critical realist explanation is that patriarchy is an enduring social tendency that existed before, during and after the election. To be enacted, it simply required inter-relation with other forces (such as globalisation, recession and nationalism), and creative agents prepared to harness it.

If single events are an insufficient guide to reality, what about *patterns of events*? Critical realists treat these tentatively, as the starting point to explore complex relations within open systems. Just because an event is not regular, it does not mean an underlying social relation does exist; it may be real but mediated, subverted or occluded. Positivism's search for constant conjunctions is inadequate in explaining deep structures and their demi-routine visibility in open, emergent systems, therefore. Critical realists must go beyond observing events to retroduce (logically reconstruct the basic conditions that underlay empirical events) and, so, identify the deep, laminated system of intersecting structures that create the conditions of actors of action (Ackroyd, 2009; Brannan et al., 2017).

For example, if a female trader does not seem subject to hyperbolic displays of masculinity in her client relations, this does not mean that patriarchal domination, or its potential, does exist. **TAQ: 1** Oppression may be hidden in private spaces, occluded by silent adjustment to everyday sexism or mediated by intersecting social relations (e.g. the woman's class resource, as the owner of scarce skills). The idea of masculine control and the common position of men to assert this over her, or other women, if the agents at hand chose to do so, remains. A social constructionist analysis may miss or exaggerate this tendency if it relies on empirical reports drawn from the partial standpoints of particularly positioned women. Critical realism, on the contrary, helps us to identify absences, positions and taken from granted contexts that create conditions of action.

As policy makers and managers are hopeful of controlling via regularities, they often seek the kind of quantitative evidence that Bhaskar critiques. Lempert (2001) encourages social constructionists to engage in 'strategic positivism', despite their philosophical reservations, to engage power holders. Critical realism supports a more rigorous means of justifying quantitative evidence. When interpreted with sensitivity to depth ontology and complex open systems, it can be employed as historical information about the experience and events occurring in a temporal-historical context. By combining this knowledge, through a plural methodology, with qualitative enquiry and the logical analysis of morphological emergence and laminated systems, a researcher can generate an account of what happened, how and why. They can then logically analyse, or retroduce, what deep social relations are the pre-conditions that endure as tendencies and create conditions of action.

Retroductive explanation should incorporate the power of language and culture to shape behaviour and so draw from weak social constructionism. It will also include extra-discursive forces, such as ownership of wealth or command of physical power. While social constructionists often refer to non-discursive objects, they commonly fail to provide an ontological account of them. For critical realists, material relations exist and have effects regardless of how a particular respondent or researcher narrates them.

A point on which critical realists and social constructionists *do* agree is that knowledge is concept-dependent and fallible. For critical realists, though, reality is real regardless of the researcher's fallible understanding of it. Our job as researchers is to articulate reality as accurately as possible and, so, we reject the strong social constructionist position that researchers have no special skills to articulate reality and should simply re-narrate respondent stories. In order for the researcher to overcome the limitation of their own standpoint (Smirthwaite and Swahnberg, 2016),

the critical realist feminist should work with the marginalised to see with them, from their standpoint, *and* go beyond their respondent's accounts, to analyse their conditions of action.

Realisation that the social world is deeply structured creates for a critical realist researcher responsibility to bring inequalities to light and to imagine and create a more liveable world for the marginalised (Bhaskar, 1986). Feminist researchers are, of course, particularly committed to empowering women (and men) oppressed by gender relations. Entrepreneurship researchers may also observe the effect of class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age, place or borders and their intersecting effects. Even when a researcher's primary interest is not structural analysis, their research must necessarily include social structural relations as part of explanation because these forces are always underlying conditions of action and, so, explanatory. All critical realist researchers, then, are accountable to the principle of creating knowledge about marginalisation and, possibly, including the marginalised in their knowledge creation and joining collective struggles for empowerment.

### *Archer's morphogenetic cycle of emergence as a route to change*

If a researcher is to create social change, they must have an ontological explanation of social emergence. For this, we draw on the critical realist Margaret Archer (1995). Her morphogenetic cycle conceptualises practice as emergent from iterative inter-relations in time between the natural material world, laminated socio-cultural relations and the socially positioned but creative agent. Unlike Bourdieuan or Foucauldian analysis that provides actors with few resources on which to reflect and respond to their action frames, Archer attributes to actors, powers of reflexivity and practice experimentation. Archer (2013) acknowledges that agents have (varying) capacity to reflect on, and respond creatively to, their embodiment and social-cultural situation. Creativity emerges from the contradictory stock of ideas available within any discourse and by tensions between the 'norm circles' to which any agents are subjected (Archer and Elder-Vass, 2012; Luke and Bates, 2015), depending on their multiple positioning within intersecting social relations (Dy et al., 2014). These tensions mean that there is always demand to forge a way ahead amid uncertainty and contradiction. Humans have the capacity to elaborate ideas and challenge the status quo but act with fallible knowledge regarding response from their social context and body when they enact new practices (Archer, 1988).

We draw on morphological emergence to consider how Engaged, Activist or Engaged–Activist Scholarships can be transformative. That is, how they can work with differently positioned stakeholders to question oppressive contexts, devise practices that logically subvert social relations and monitor effects. Realist evaluators talk about creating and testing Context–Mechanism–Outcome configurations that are a programme's theory of change (see Nielsen and Miraglia, 2017; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Similarly, engaged and activist scholars must consider how to transform contexts by giving agents the idea, motivation and/or resources to act in ways that empower, and then monitor effects.

### *Feminist critical realism: philosophy, accountability and transformational potential*

In summary, feminist critical realism advocates a realist *philosophy*, founded on ideas of depth ontology and embracing only a soft form of social constructionism. Critical realism bequeaths to researchers an awareness of enduring social structural mechanisms and, so, *accountability* to create for the marginalised more empowering conditions. Archer's morphological cycle provides an ontological mechanism for *transformation*: human reflexivity and experimentation, albeit in relation with pre-existing conditions of action.



In the sections that follow, we explore, in turn, the philosophy, accountability and transformational potential of Engaged and Activist Scholarships. Finding both only partially adequate, we propose Engaged–Activist Scholarship to the entrepreneurship research community.

## Engaged scholarship: philosophy, accountability and transformational potential

Van De Ven's (2007, 2011, 2016a) Engaged Scholarship is rapidly being institutionalised into the academic profession (King and Learmonth, 2015; Zahra, 2016). Surprisingly, however, Van De Ven's detailed method has been subject to scant examination. Zahra's (2016) homage to Van De Ven in the *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* does not closely scrutinise his method, for example. Researchers *are* beginning to push the boundaries of Engaged Scholarship in ways that *imply* critique (e.g. Wells and Nieuwenhuis, 2017). We directly scrutinise its philosophy, accountability and transformational potential to assess whether it is compatible with the ontological and ethical commitments of feminist critical realism.

### Philosophy

Van De Ven (2007: 38) claimed that Engaged Scholarship is critical realist because it relies on an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. We assess, however, that Engaged Scholarship relies on positivist ontology and that its subjectivism exceeds the soft social constructionism accepted within critical realist epistemology, conceding too much to the sensemaking of powerful research commissioners as a means of explaining and changing the social world.

**Ontology.** Van De Ven's (2007) book-length exposition argues, it is possible to develop laws of social life that are useful to practitioners through four actions: (1) researchers and practitioners jointly identify a problem situation, (2) multiple theories are considered as potential explanations, (3) each theory is rigorously analysed through hypothesis testing and (4) explanation is developed that is theoretically and practically useful.

Van De Ven (2007: 103) claims his method is retroductive but, in fact, his lawmaking is a method of abduction, developing theories to explain validated hypotheses, within boundary conditions. For example, he says that the best way of testing hypotheses is to design 'crucial experiments' whose results can validate one hypothesis and invalidate another. Hypothesis testing is rejected by critical realists because of its over-reliance on regularity and experience as a means of assessing reality (see Brannan et al., 2017). Bhaskar outlined how social structural forces may be real yet mediated, subverted or occluded in any given event and how events may not be experienced. We cannot, therefore, rely on regular observations as the *only* means of assessing reality and we should be even more cautious when observations rely on practitioner experience. We need to retroduce the conditions that precede observable events and experiences, and that may be latent and have no empirically observable effect in a given context, yet be a real condition of action.

Van De Ven's (2011, 2016a) later work suggests growing awareness that social life includes a diverse range of influences, some quite distant from the everyday experience of actors. He always advocated mid-range theories (Van De Ven, 2007: 139) and latterly shows more interest in context. He advocates an ecosystem view of entrepreneurship (Zahra, 2016), for example. Nevertheless, he continues to assert the abductive method. In recent dialogue with Zahra (2016b), he asserted that

Empirical truth cannot be determined until hypotheses are tested.(p. 224)

Following on logically from his faith in lawmaking, Van De Ven does not share the critical realist's scepticism about the plausibility of prediction, design and control in the social world (see, for example, Brannan et al., 2017; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011; Nielsen and Miraglia, 2017). This is a crucial difference when we are discussing engaged research; while Engaged Scholars can draw on past regularities to design the future, the critical realist researcher must rely on knowledge about underlying realities and historical events and experiences to experiment with a complex and emergent future.

The practical difficulty of using the positivist commitments of Engaged Scholarship to understand and change the real world is illustrated by Wells and Nieuwenhuis' (2017) struggle to grasp complex and evolving systems using empirical regularities and design principles in 'immersive engaged scholarship'. They raise the possibility of adapting Van De Ven's method to be critical realist, focusing more on theory production and *experimental* design. We concur with their thinking but suggest that adopting a different ontology and research process means developing a new research method, hence our proposal of Engaged–Activist Scholarship.

In summary, it seems that Engaged Scholarship's ontology is not fully resolved. While Van De Ven increasingly casts the engaged researcher's eye to issues outside of organisations, his limited grasp of the complexity and emergence of context and his commitment to abduction are inconsistent with critical realism.

**Epistemology.** Van De Ven adopts a social constructionist epistemology that encourages researchers to give up their 'God's eye view' and to conceive of practitioners as 'knowing different'. He acknowledges that practitioners have interests that shape their perception of problems but suggests that Engaged Scholar should adopt the research commissioner's perspective:

Implicitly or explicitly, all research is undertaken in service of someone – the researcher, a funding agency, practitioners, academics, a profession, etc. Phenomena do not exist objectively 'out there'; they are uniquely perceived and framed by different people ... knowing whose perspective is being addressed and engaging them in describing the phenomenon is necessary to frame the focus, level, and scope of a research study. (Van De Ven, 2007: 265)

For Van De Ven, researchers can afford to be agnostic in their ethical assessment of practitioner perspectives and interests. They are urged to be pragmatists who judge the relevance of knowledge by how well it addresses the issue for which it was intended (Van De Ven interviewed by Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015). Critical realists contend very differently. For us, there *is* a world 'out there' in which real people occupy objective social situations that include real barriers to creating a flourishing life (Sayer, 2011). It is the role of researchers to produce the most logically convincing argument they can about a reality ridden with unequal interests.

Van De Ven *is* aware that research settings involve conflict. He draws on Carlisle (2004) to argue that

When different interests arise, developing an adequate common knowledge is a political process of negotiating and defining common interests. (p. 559)

Van De Ven (2007) is also hopeful that accounts that conflict with the research commissioners can be used to develop more rigorous explanation:

Engaging people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives represents a method of triangulating on a complex problem ... (p. 69)



Ultimately, however, Van De Ven (2007, 2011) voices cautious about depth engagement with conflicting relations because a shared understanding cannot always be reached. He warns,

... the engagement of different stakeholders in a study often produces inconsistent and contradictory perspectives of a problem domain being examined ....(Van De Ven, 2007: 69)

In later work, Van De Ven (2016a) recommends keeping away from the most deeply contentious or silenced issues in organisations:

For most problems or phenomena, some aspects may be scientifically unknown but not worth researching because the minds of stakeholders are closed or have been ‘made up’ for cultural, religious, political, or undiscussable reasons.

Engaged Scholarship’s epistemology is at odds with critical realism because the method presumes much less fundamental divisions of interests among stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> When powerful conflicts arise, the research project is avoided or the researcher favours research commissioner’s ways of knowing. Van De Ven and his followers almost always engage with managers and other neo-liberal actors, such as policy makers (King and Learmonth, 2015; Korl et al., 2015). The distortion that these commissioner’s interests may have on knowledge is silenced.

The consequences of a client’s eye view for entrepreneurship scholarship is evident in Van de Ven’s comment on entrepreneurial ecosystems (Zahra, 2016). While Van De Ven characterises entrepreneurship as a collective ‘team sport’ that includes distant players like competitors and government officials, family and community figures – and social structures – are missing. **[AQ: 2]** The result is both a masculine and elitist view of everyday entrepreneurship. Van De Ven’s (2011) engagement with marginal contexts also seems to emphasise ‘foreign’ domains, as if US entrepreneurs are not bound by context. And, Van De Ven presents context primarily as an enabler, arguing that entrepreneurs can change industry standards (personal communication cited in Zahra, 2016), for example. Missing is sensitivity to varying conditions of action of entrepreneurs, forged by positioning in intersecting social relations, that create unequal resources and capability to influence power holders.

Van De Ven’s epistemology is at odds with critical realism: he conflates an undoubted need to take standpoints seriously with a strong social constructionist position that ultimately favours research commissioners. In entrepreneurship, powerful pro-masculine and neo-liberal stakeholders like policy makers and banks are much more likely to commission research than, say, the poor self-employed, who have weak collective representing bodies and scarce resources. Engaged Scholarship contains few mechanisms to prevent a politically naive research community from under-analysing funder’s knowing and interests. It poses the real risk that entrepreneurial ecosystems will be viewed in masculine, agentic terms and that hugely pressing questions of poverty, exclusion and exploitation will be silenced in entrepreneurship scholarship.

## *Accountability*

Following on logically from Engaged Scholarship’s positivist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, Van De Ven is apolitical regarding to whom or what his method is accountable: implicitly, knowledge is accountable to the objectivist principles of rational analysis and the engagement process is accountable to the client. Van De Ven (2007) passingly acknowledges that stakeholders have politically unequal positions to represent their interests but he provides no commitment or methodology to support the marginalised. Indeed, he is explicitly committed to

withholding analysis to protect client sensibilities and expresses regret for the one occasion he broke his own rule (Van De Ven, 2007).

When conflict is encountered in the course of research, Van De Ven (2007) advocates building 'common interests' through iterative rounds of dialogue to create

a richer appreciation of one another's positions, assuming they respect each other and are willing to listen and learn. (p. 255)

In later work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), Van De Ven refers to conflicting interests in organisations as 'paradoxes of belonging'. He argues for reframing of paradox as interdependencies so that all interests can be treated as equally valuable and reconciled. We fear that, without a specific methodology to draw out and honour the conditions of the marginalised, non-ideal speech conditions (see Davis et al., 2017) will silence their interests and that Engaged Scholarship will fail to offer depth analysis of underlying causes. Indeed, there is a danger that Engaged Scholarship will be used to posture, postpone and whitewash (Martin, 2010) and so enable and shore up oppressive social relations.

At times, Van De Ven (2011) seems to want to effect social change. For example, he encouraged management researchers to engage with neglected settings. He even argues that one criteria of rigour is empowering the marginalised (interview with Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015). But his method does not help the researcher engage power holders in deep problematisation and action beyond 'the business case' (Kearins and Fryer, 2011; Wells and Nieuwenhuis, 2017), nor does it enable the researcher to identify and call out injustice.

Clearly, on the question of accountability, Engaged Scholarship is seriously at odds with feminist critical realists. Researchers with a sense of accountability to the marginalised will need to augment the Engaged Scholarship method. For example, Ram et al.'s (2015, 2011) engagement with policy makers regarding the support needs of new migrant entrepreneurs incorporated realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and action research (Lewin, 1946), methods committed to unearthing underlying social conditions and empowerment. Longitudinal engagement with vulnerable research subjects relied on voluntary effort, beyond the research commission. Wells and Nieuwenhuis' (2017) partisan commitment to sustainability meant their 'immersive engaged scholarship' progressed through ethical and political dilemmas and, without greater support from Engaged Scholarship, identity crises.

We conclude that Engaged Scholarship will not help entrepreneurship researchers navigate competing accountabilities and maintain accountability to the marginalised.

### *Transformational potential*

Van De Ven contends that engagement is a learning process that is most likely to be fruitful when it starts from where stakeholders are and pursues the problems they conceive and value. While subject to limited empirical analysis, this is theoretically convincing: critical realism's reflexive agents are more likely to change their cognition and engage in practice experimentation when new knowledge appeals to their order of interests (see Archer, 1995). However, critical realists must conclude that inadequacies with Engaged Scholarship's philosophy and accountability mean it is ill equipped to expose the mechanisms that cause oppressive conditions and, so, to engage practitioners in empowerment. Indeed, Engaged Scholarship can be used to defend pro-masculine neo-liberalism and, so, to oppress.

In his most recent research on organisations (Hargrave and Van De Ven, 2017), Van De Ven explores the tension arising from conflicting interests in organisation more deeply and

conceptualises the kinds of changes that may occur as each party acts under conditions of contradiction and emergent complexity. These are ideas more consistent with critical realist philosophy, with the potential to support researchers to navigate the complex political process of engaging to create social change. Hargrave and Van De Ven's (2017) article does not reference Engaged Scholarship, however. Integrating them into Engaged Scholarship would mean adopting an ontology of complex emergence, rather than positivism, and both an epistemology and sense of accountability sensitive to the marginalised. We suggest that such dramatic changes warrant a new method, hence our proposal for Engaged–Activist Scholarship.

In short, Engaged Scholarship's positivist ontology, excessively social constructionist epistemology and neutral or power-biased accountability create weak resources for identifying and transforming deep social relations and are incompatible with feminist critical realism. In the next section, we consider whether Activist Scholarship is a more useful method.

## **Activist scholarship: philosophy, accountability and transformational potential**

Activist Scholars begin research with 'partisan' commitment to the marginalised and ask more deeply than Van De Ven 'for what?' and 'with whom?' we conduct research. They are critical researchers who argue it is not sufficient to expose domination to create change, that critical research in the absence of activism is ethically risky, and that engaging in struggle with the disempowered is an explanatory research method. There is no 'guru' researcher of the field or even a single label for their method. We draw together researchers with shared commitments whom we call 'Activist Scholars' and discuss compatibility between the philosophy, accountability and transformation potential of their method and feminist critical realism.

### *Philosophy*

Activist Scholarship is relatively silent on ontology but vocal on epistemology (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). While critical realism is rarely incorporated as an underlabouring philosophy, we argue with Brook and Darlington (2015) that it is congruent with the implicit assumptions of many Activist Scholars and has the potential to enhance the method.

**Ontology.** Activist Scholars share critical realism's belief that the social world is characterised by uneven social relations that cannot be changed by researchers or oppressed subjects simply criticising them or narrating them differently. They also emphasise material relations that cannot be changed by an everyday practitioner, such as banking or welfare systems. They thereby reject strong social constructionism. Like critical realists, Activist Scholars site norms as part of social problems. For example, the stronghold that sex–gender distinctions have on imaginations (Ackery and True, 2010). They thereby accept soft social constructionism. While Activist Scholars rarely discuss ontology, we infer that their underlabouring assumptions are consistent with critical realism.

We suggest that Activist Scholarship could be strengthened via more explicit use of Bhaskar's stratified ontology, laminated systems and retrodution and Archer's morphological cycle. Just as realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) draws on critical realism to assess social interventions, the 'context + mechanism = outcome' analytic device supports analysis of how a struggle (*outcome*) is emergent from agents responding in a more or less socially influenced or creative way (as part of a morphological cycle) to a *context* shaped by other agents in their local, practice

relationships and by meso- and macro-level social relations (i.e. a laminated system), as these are variously influenced by the *mechanisms* of pro-masculine capitalism (explained by retroduction).

**Epistemology.** As Van De Ven acknowledged (without full resolution), the problems we see depend on the concepts at hand and our values. For Activist Scholars, critical realists and feminists, too, there is no simple objectivism. But this is not simply because of the power of language to name problems. Rather, it relates to the power structures at hand in knowing and telling. Since the Enlightenment, knowledge producers allied to the status quo of the ruling classes have created the illusion of rationalists, separated from the emotional (feminine, Black and working class) mess of the practitioner and able to look with an unemotional, ordered and God's eye view on reality. These civilised men have an automatic right to pass judgement on the marginalised and, through their neutral expertise, create evidence for the disciplines of ruling (Liebert et al., 2011; Sharma and Wright, 2016). The positivist method has been used to mask researcher subjectivity (Ackerly and True, 2010) and, crucially for engaged research, the interests of research commissioners. Thus, few policy researchers worry that their client is inherently partisan (Brook and Darlington, 2015). **[AQ: 3]**

Siplon (2014) rejects non-partisan objectivity on epistemological and political grounds and instead advocates working from a commitment to social movements:

How can scholars determine 'truth' and teachers propagate it, the objection goes, if we place ourselves inside the struggles we are seeking to examine? That objection, however, makes the highly debatable assumption that in a world with vastly uneven power distributions, positions of neutrality have neutral consequences. I reject this assumption, in part because I don't believe it, but mainly because I think it helps to normalize and sustain status quo distributions of power, resources, and legitimacy.(p. 488)

Critical realists need to create evidence about experience and events from a variety of standpoints but also to retroduce underlying social relations. Western, White and middle class feminism has wrestled with critique from Black, working class and colonially oppressed women that the knowledge they produce reflects privileged women's concerns and situations, over-generalising to, and marginalising, the position of women with fewer resources to credentialise knowledge (Carty and Das Gupta, 2009). A range of analytical tools have emerged to re-define rigorous research as reflexive to the researcher's position and standpoint, sensitive to the complexities of intersectional social relations, explanatory of other standpoints and modest in generalisations (see Gunnarsson et al., 2016). Drawing on standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), rigour for feminist Activist Scholars is concerned with collective knowledge production, from multiple situations. It should put centre stage the situation and experience of poor, colonised, Black and minoritised ethnic, migrant and queer women, for example.

The exact role of the marginal in knowledge production is not fully resolved (Barinaga and Parker, 2013), however. Commonly, Activist Scholars advocate participatory action research and its claim that we can better learn about relations of domination by trying to change them (e.g. Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Both Brook and Darlington (2015) and Cox (2015) draw on Gramsci (1971) to advocate research with ordinary people, deemed to be capable partners due to their power of intellectual thought. Archer (2013) makes congruent claims that ontologically, agents have the cognitive capacity for reflection and sociologically, modern society compels actors to choose between or innovate ways of knowing by confronting them with multiple discourses and complex conditions for which there are no effective social recipes. However, Archer also argues that agents have different reflexive capacities. The skills of participant researchers to observe events and experience rigorously, from different standpoints and social positions, and to retroduce underlying social relations, cannot be taken for granted, therefore.

Cox (2015) urges activist researchers to work with people who have already taken the leap from outrage to action and are ready to reflect more deeply. In Archer's (2013) model, this means working with 'meta-reflexives', people motivated to create political critique and to act in ways that might not serve their individual short-term interests. In entrepreneurship, this might include enterprise, housing, welfare and health agencies who work with marginalised entrepreneurs or more reflective and politically aware entrepreneurs. Brook and Darlington (2015) urge us to also engage with the unorganised, vulnerable and unwaged. They see opening up a space of dialogue and resistance, building solidarity around shared interests and organising social movement as part of a researcher's responsibility and research process. This observation seems particularly apposite for entrepreneurship researchers because individualisation that keeps the marginalised self-employed from recognising their shared positions and drives them to seek personal solutions to their marginalised circumstances is a condition of action that has caused growth in small scale enterprise (Du Gay, 1996). As a result, researchers of everyday entrepreneurship have only fragmented and weak social movements with which to engage (and receive research commissions). Researchers could usefully raise consciousness of shared interests and build collectives between the marginalised self-employed but are likely to face practical struggles in doing so.

Even when social movements are established, Lempert (2001) reports tension between community demands for short-term research that supports tactical action and researcher commitment to structural analysis. Liebert et al. (2011) describe how their feminist gaze must be free to zoom in and out of different levels of social relations as they engage in struggles of resistance. Collaboration and critical interrogation may be broken into over-lapping phases (Brook and Darlington, 2015), so the activist researcher has time and independence to assume the role of retroducer, capable of disconfirming the assumptions of activism (Brook and Darlington, 2015; Lempert, 2001). This approach rejects the viability of a fully democratic research process.

In fact, sustained engagement with the marginalised can be practically difficult for researchers. The marketised university – the territory that shapes our dispositions as researchers – is a standpoint dominated by the interests of business and state (Brook and Darlington, 2015; Liebert et al., 2011; Smith, 2009). Ever increasing pressure to publish and attract funding encourages work geared to improving government and corporate productivity, not that which critiques corporate and state power or engages grassroots oppositional movements (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey, 2009). The standpoint of universities may, of course, be altered when research funding explicitly encourages engagement with the marginalised. An example seems to be The Global Challenges Research Fund supported by the UK Government. This depends on researching in relationship with agencies in developing economies. It will be interesting to observe if it leads universities to value such relationship building and if its projects are disruptive, activist research or approaches more like Engaged Scholarship that creates temporary solutions to social crises and shore up the status quo (see Wells and Nieuwenhuis, 2017).

Time pressure creates intense temptation for researchers to engage with the marginalised only for long enough to conduct critical analysis, but this normative approach raises ethical dilemmas if critical theory becomes a depressing mirror in which the marginalised can only helplessly stare (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). How, then, to resolve the ethics raised by critical research without becoming overwhelmed by the responsibilities of activism? Schnedier (2003) suggests there may be dialectic between building collective struggles and radical research communities. These collectives bolster against doubt if partisan work is unrecognised (Schneider, 2003) or aggressed (Mama, 2009), support analysis and sustain engagement. Innovations such as the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship's Gender and Enterprise Network are growing into such communities as they build a feminist research collective and engage more deeply with researchers in developing economies and with marginalised women in small enterprise (Dy et al., 2017).

In summary, the approach of Activist Scholars of creating knowledge from inside social struggles (although not necessarily giving up the expert researcher role), taking a partisan position and building a dialectic of radical research and practitioner communities is congruent with feminist critical realism.

### *Accountability*

Activist Scholars are accountable to creating good explanation of marginalisation and using knowledge to create change. Siplon (2014) observes that engagement with people suffering injustice can create a tipping point to activism. Feminists are also increasingly recognising that gender struggles have global dimensions and that scholarship and activism must be networked transnationally (Ackerly and True, 2010). Carty and Das Gupta (2009) urge that, rather than international conferencing, we engage in building transnational research teams and grassroots solidarities – a point of reflection for entrepreneurship researchers.

Being accountable is complex because interests of people (women) are not singular, nor can they be read-off simply from the colour of a person's skin, their nationality, class, age or sexuality. In arguing that people have shared interests to activate against common underlying social relations – such as those that make entrepreneurship more masculine, devalue feminine forms of trade or create burdens of domestic work that undermine entrepreneurial effort – we must not presume that all women occupy the same positions or standpoints (Clegg, 2016; Dy et al., 2014; Harding, 1991). Analysis and action must proceed reciprocally and with sensitivity, and also with determination, if we are to create ruptures to the more destructive forces of pro-masculine capitalism for marginal entrepreneurs.

In summary, Activist Scholars are accountable to the principles of adequate and practical analysis, to their university and their research funder. In addition, they are accountable to the marginalised and building a radical research community that operates in a dialectic with social movements. The United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise rewards research that has reach and significance in benefiting society, culture, policy, health, environment and well-being (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2016). It remains to be seen whether it will fully recognise Activist research where it focuses on developing and giving voice to social movements that are embryonic and risky, as will be the case in activist entrepreneurship scholarship.

### *Transformational potential*

Like Engaged Scholars, Activist Scholars are committed to communication. However, their key audience is the marginalised. Feminist Activist Scholarship is called upon to make research accessible to women in contexts where knowledge resources that challenge dominant norms are scarce (Mama, 2009) and to vernacularise knowledge to inform local realities (Liebert et al., 2011; Liebowitz, 2013).

Interestingly, for entrepreneurship researchers, Activist Scholarship includes creative acts such as those that subvert and then re-write symbolic artefacts (e.g. Budgeting of women that challenges 'gender neutral' budgeting decisions – Women's Budget Group, 2016) or produce media that disrupts assumptions and unearths silences (e.g. The International Vulva Knitting Circle – Liebert et al., 2011).

Activist Scholars may also wish to influence power holders but struggle to do so if their political commitment is used to stigmatise them as 'mere' activists. Okazawa-Rey (2009) seeks to soothe this anxiety by asking whether it is realistic to dismantle the master's house with his own tools. Similarly, Cox (2015) warns,



few academics have undergone the political learning curve represented by social movements. This may explain the widespread persistence – beyond any intellectual or empirical credibility – of a faith in ‘critical scholarship’ isolated from agency, an orientation to policy makers and mainstream media as primary audiences, or an unquestioned commitment to existing institutional frameworks as pathways to substantial social change. (p. 34)

Ultimately, Activist Scholars compel academics to build the intellectual engine, activity and scale of social movements. Smith (2009) notes,

The system can handle thousands of ‘oppositional’ academics who do work on their own; it is not until these thousands begin to act collectively that the system can be challenged. (p. 41)

Cox (2015) advocates that Activist Scholarship asks more active research questions while engaging in social movements:

spending less time explaining how awful things are to those who live them personally, or presenting purely technical or policy solutions that might work if only the powerful had the goodwill to undertake them, and spending more time speaking among ourselves about *what we are going to do about the fact that things are bad and this is shored up by entrenched interests*: in other words, discussing our own agency. (p. 46, Italics in original)

Developing movements means working with the marginalised to articulate their situations and interests. This can be a daunting work where researchers do not always know what to do (King and Learmonth, 2015) yet have responsibilities for effects (Brook and Darlington, 2015). Not knowing is predicted by critical realism: as open systems are complex, they are difficult to predict or design. Action must be tentative and sensitive and responsibility for movement-making shared with the marginalised; equally, not knowing can mean we have progressed beyond institutional logics to ask ‘queer’ questions about how a better world might be for the marginalised (King and Learmonth, 2015; Phillips et al., 2014).

Movement theorising may, itself, also become part of our research programme (Bendl et al., 2014) to facilitate realist evaluation of ‘what works, for whom, in what circumstances and how’ or, in other words, deciphering the ‘context + mechanism = outcome’ configurations (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) created (or demanded) through movements. In entrepreneurship research, we may take action to build communities of marginalised self-employed and analyse the effect of this on their underlying social relations.

We propose that a more activist approach to research is necessary when confronting social mechanisms whose effects are widely silenced, denied or cast as normal by pro-masculine neo-liberal power holders, as is often the case in entrepreneurship. Equally, it is consistent with critical realism that change may also occur by engaging in a more tempered fashion with power holders *if* this can change their cognition and action. Researchers should not take positions that are ideologically opposed to either activism or engagement but build knowledge about what works, in what context and develop ambidextrous relationships, with power holders *and* the marginalised. Hence, we advocate to entrepreneurship research Engaged–Activist Scholarship, a method that combines the audiences of Engaged and Activist Scholarships.

## Engaged–Activist entrepreneurship scholarship

Philosophically, Engaged–Activist Scholarship is committed to explanation founded on stratified reality, laminated systems and morphological cycle. University supported research is bound to

have multiple forms of accountability but Engaged–Activist Scholarship emphasises accountability to change the oppressive contexts that cause marginalisation. Such transformation may occur in various ways via plural methodologies (i.e. using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods), ambidextrous relations with stakeholders and collective action. We cite examples of how these principles may apply to marginalisation in entrepreneurship.

### *Philosophy*

Engaged–Activist Scholars will aim to develop theoretical explanations of empirical conditions by underlabouring their accounts with Bhaskar’s stratified ontology and laminated systems and Archer’s morphological cycle. They will employ the logical process of retroduction to move beyond fallible observation of experience and events to retroduce deeper social conditions. This approach will support, for example, an understanding of the processes that tend to create gender inequality in business start-up and growth.

Engaged–Activist researchers will employ plural research methodologies to peer into empirical contexts, observing effects on the marginalised via narrative and extra-narrative evidence and sensitively combining data regarding regularities and associations with intelligence about processes, to explain events. Ultimately, it must logically retroduce the deep social relations that create conditions of action.

Thus, for example, the explosive growth in low-income self-employment in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2014, 2016) should be researched by drawing on large-scale quantitative evidence, in-depth qualitative investigation with theoretically sampled low-paid, self-employed and other market actors. Action research with programmes and social movements can then test theories about underlying conditions of action and how they can be changed.

### *Accountability*

Engaged–Activist Scholars will negotiate the tensions between their multiple accountabilities and strategically deploy engagement and activism to ensure accountability to the marginalised. As in small enterprise, the marginalised are individualised, experiencing their struggles as personal circumstance, and isolated from a community with whom to learn about the social origins of their situation; we cannot rely on their accounts of experience to raise our awareness of marginalisation. Instead, we must support whatever budding collectives exist, work with established collectives who have some concern for the self-employed (e.g. trade unions and small business membership associations) and directly build understanding and movements. In gender research, for example, we can work with the disparate practitioners and support agencies committed to empower women entrepreneurs and women themselves to develop deeper political critique of contexts, propose policy solutions and activate to develop a larger social movement that will campaign for business, welfare, childcare and maternity support, and equality rights.

### *Transformational potential*

While Engaged Scholars seek to create change from within, on the terms of power holders, and Activist Scholars aim to build social movements to fight from the outside for change, Engaged–Activists will adopt an ambidextrous approach. They will work with different audiences across time, within and against the status quo.

A feminist critical realist form of *engaged* research is likely to resemble tempered radicalism (Bendl et al., 2014; Meyerson, 2003). Via the long-game of ‘passing’ as neo-liberal subjects,

researchers will pursue conventional research commissions and interests while gently asserting the existence and cause of marginalisation in entrepreneurship and choosing occasional moments to make disruptive insurgencies. For example, adopting Davis et al.'s (2017) approach of mapping power dynamics could gently bring to light entrepreneurs and conditions that are overlooked in entrepreneur ecosystem policies.

More activist research will focus on movement-making and global solidarity building, directly calling out and acting to disrupt entrenched interests. For example, working with women's organisations to reveal the oppressive conditions faced by women in small firms, global supply chains and households.

We recommend ambidexterity not simply as a yes/and to engagement and activism but as a strategic approach that considers the 'context + mechanism = outcome' configuration at hand and makes a decision about what should, and can, be changed by adopting either approach. This may involve trade-offs of energy and credibility and short-term tactics as well as long-term vision. As social systems are hard to predict, actions are experiments whose effects should be monitored.

Wells and Nieuwenhuis (2017) warn that episodic encounters will not challenge the status quo. Ven de Ven thinks of research in 10-year timeframes (Zahra, 2016) and advocates group approaches to complex problems (Van De Ven, 2007). Engaged-Activism relies on a more extensive notion of collectives, such as radical research communities and networks that include social movements that together seek change across a range of actions that might be usefully visioned as shared programmes.

Within increasingly marketised universities, Engaged-Activist scholarship's social value creation may go unrecognised by promotion and performance review committees. We are called upon to forsake the weight of the academy for long enough to challenge it about the purpose and accountability of research (Liebert et al., 2011). Nonetheless, we may win reward via initiatives, such as the REF impact criteria and Global Challenges Fund and be nourished with energy and authenticity from our relationships with the marginalised, social movements and radical research communities. Perhaps, there is also a chance that a scholarly led change or entrepreneurial process could stand as an academic output, similar to a musical composition (Zahra, 2016); crucially, developments in methods and reviewer appreciation should make it plausible to publish Engaged-Activist Scholarship in the most rigorous journals (see Mathiassen, 2017). We hope these prospects are a sufficient diet to inspire an ambidextrous, collective and plural Engaged-Activist method to pursue a better world for the marginalised in small enterprise.

## **Conclusion**

We have accepted Van De Ven's argument that practitioners are more likely to use research if steps are taken to engage them with it and if they are involved in knowledge production. However, we have concluded that Engaged Scholarship does not provide a rigorous means of theorising conditions of actions, agency and emergence, nor is it properly accountable to the marginalised or transforming conditions that oppress. A more politically knowing and committed engagement with power holders *is* accepted as part of an empowering research process. Activist Scholarship is also accepted. We have proposed that change can be pursued through a strategic, ambidextrous Engaged-Activist Scholarship that works with both politically aware engagement and Activist Scholarship, a method that is compatible with, and might be further enhanced through feminist critical realism. We propose that Engaged-Activism employs multiple methodologies and audiences to generate knowledge about underlying realities and how they change in an accountable partnership with the marginalised in small enterprise.

We urge entrepreneurship researchers to engage with marginalised small business traders and employees to consider the plausibility of our method. Lack of contact means few entrepreneurship researchers reach a tipping point of action; while researchers engage with university enterprise systems, hi-tech and growth firms and in sanitised small business networks and associations they avoid stark realities and muted standpoints. We particularly hope that more entrepreneurship researchers will engage and activate transnationally to address the unconscionable poverty suffered by too many small traders.

When should entrepreneurship researchers use more engaged or activist research methods or, more strategically, what symphony should they conduct over time and space, by ambidextrously playing both tunes? This is an empirical question that asks what change can be achieved by what pattern of engagement or activism. Researching our own practice and movement-making may seem self-referential, but it is vital if we are to move on from not knowing what to do when engaging critical theory with open, complex systems.

The marketised university has good reason to engage. Trends, such as the REF impact criteria and the Global Challenges Fund, are creating a short-term logic for more engaged research but activism is inherently long-term and risky; outcomes like impact case studies and grants cannot be assured. Yet, our students are embedded in the world of divided interests indicated by critical realism and feminism. It is in the interests of many of the customers of universities that we challenge pro-masculine capitalist assumptions about gender and capital and the future of work. We must bring their interests to light so that Engaged–Activist Scholarship can be part of a progressive vision for the university, where enterprise research that is pluralist in its audience and methodology and committed in its philosophy, accountability and collective transformative action is viewed as relevant and useful.

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## Notes

1. While ‘engaged scholarship’ is now used as a generic term to mean engaged research (e.g. Strumińska-Kutra, 2016) or even service-learning, we review ‘Engaged Scholarship’, the specific method detailed in Van De Ven (2007). We also refer to Van De Ven’s later research, often with co-authors, and to discussions or use of his method.
2. In his most recent publication, Van De Ven writes about a more political understanding of conflicting interests in organisations (Hargrave and Van De Ven, 2017). This has not (yet) led Van De Ven to revise Engaged Scholarship’s philosophical underlabouring or his analytic method, however.

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## Author biographies

Julia Rouse is concerned with explaining and creating the conditions that underlay 'decent entrepreneurship'. She also has a keen interest in maternity management in small enterprise and is leading a campaign to change UK maternity regulations for the self-employed. Julia's commitment to research collectives has grown since founding the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneur's Gender and Enterprise Network (GEN). She is currently establishing a new research centre on decent work and productivity at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Helen Woolnough is a Research Fellow at the Sylvia Pankhurst Gender Research Centre, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She is leading the Engaged–Activist project, Generating Routes for Women's Leadership (GROWL), along with Professor Julia Rouse. Helen's research interests focus on workplace diversity, specifically transformative and impactful mentoring.